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ABSTRACT

In a study of differences and similarities between children's oral and written stories, 23 third grade pupils wrote stories about a given topic and then, two weeks later, told stories about the same topic. Analysis of the stories revealed five types of narrative structures, of which the most commonly used was a "situation-problem-solution" pattern, and the least commonly used was a pattern in which a problem is repeated with variations until a solution is found. Among other results were that the oral stories tended to be longer than the written stories, more oral stories ranged over structures with more complex events than did the written stories, and the difference in length of T-units between the two modes was not statistically significant. Oral story telling caused more problems for many children than did the written form, due to a belief that oral stories must be based on other people's stories, to fears of performing before an audience, and to problems in losing their train of thought. The two most original stories revealed a sense of detail and dialogue that arose from a natural language context; that these stories were low in syntactic complexity shows that a total language product should not be judged by just one standard. The study suggests the desirability of providing opportunities for oral story telling and of giving real, legitimate, and specific feedback. (Examples of children's stories are included.) (GT)

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Story Tellers, Story Writers
A Research Report

by Helen Lamar King

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INSIGHTS into open education

Story Tellers, Story Writers
A Research Report

By Helen Lamar King
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One day in the jungle a deer was walking and saw something move in the bushes the deer was fritened and then a lion jumped out The deer was fritened and then a few minutes the deer found out that the lion was friendly and so that was that.
(Written story, grade 3)

Once there was lion he was always bragging that he was so tugh once he got in a fight with a tiger the lion got so beat up he was in bed for five days. That night he made plans to beat up the tiger. That morning he acted like a big deal so he got beat up again and again day after day one day he got a thorn in his paw and said yow! The whole jungle shook so hard it blew the top off huts and people got noked and tiger got noked and he got beat up this time.
(Written story, grade 3)

In 1837 there was a rich man. One day he was going around in his horse and buggy and he saw a wild tiger. His wife started fainting and the children started screaming and the horse started bucking. And the horse was so close to the buggy it got tipped over. And everyone in it died. And the horse ran free. And started calling the tiger names because he killed his master. And then the tiger got mad and started chasing the horse. The horse hid and the tiger ran right past him. And then the horse started running the other way. And he caught up with a herd of wild horses and pretty soon he became a wild horse too. One day tiger caught up with the horse that called him names. This time the horse doubled back and the tiger kept on running. The horse got back with his friends and then the horse was caught and tamed again. He was sold to another rich man except this rich man was mean and he killed the man. His wife and children were nice, though. But the horse ran away anyway and made friends with the tiger.
(Oral story, grade 3)

The stories quoted above are examples of different types of narrative structures and story-telling modes encountered in a study of forty-six written and oral stories of three groups of third-grade children. Studies of children's writing can benefit the teaching of writing and this essay will attempt to point out a few of the results of this study.

Helping children grow in their ability to express themselves through writing continues to present a problem for the teacher, the curriculum planner and the educational researcher. How can we help children develop and improve effective writing skills?

Some teachers, because many of the elements of "good" writing are difficult to locate, have attempted to resolve the dilemma of "poor" writing by choosing simply to emphasize the study of grammar. But such a choice has been challenged by research in recent years. An emphasis on grammar and usage necessarily moves the

teacher and student away from language acquisition and development to language performance. Children acquire language by using language, by forming rules about structures, by testing out their language forms and by receiving feedback through language-interaction with adults. Grammar and usage often come either before or behind the child's actual point of language development and thus become nothing more than training outside of a natural language context. It seems to me that we need to find new ways for children to acquire and develop written language before we can expect good written performance.

Research over the years has continually shown that the stressing of grammar and usage in language instruction does not improve writing. What, then, does? Several studies have suggested that the practice of "sentence-combining" will improve the quality and help the development of more mature writing skills. This method is seen as more "natural" than grammar lessons since exercises in sentence-combining do allow the children to use the skills they already know through their oral language abilities--those of embedding, deletion and substitution. Further studies have suggested that the "mode" in which one selects to write may elicit different kinds of syntactic complexity and hence different degrees of growth.

All of these studies may continue to be criticized by some educators as artificial since they still remove language from its natural context. I felt a need to examine the actual oral and written language of children in order to discover what influences their writing. I wanted, in particular, to investigate the relationship between the child's oral story-telling ability and the child's written narrative skills. I wanted to see what specific differences and similarities in syntax, length and narrative-mode existed between oral and written stories.

I asked twenty-three third graders in three different classrooms to write a story about a lion and a tiger. Two weeks later I asked them to tell a story about a lion and tiger. I would be the only audience for these stories and purposely chose the same stimulus for both types of story so that the "assignment" would have a minimal effect. The classroom teachers were asked to assign children to this activity on the basis of handwriting skills since I did not want the students' handwriting to be a hindrance to getting the story down. The children were also assured that punctuation and spelling were not to be "graded" and help was given for spelling when it was asked for to keep the children from choosing lesser words or forms in order to avoid "mistakes."

The categories I planned on examining in the stories were: detail in characterization, complexity of narrative events, syntactic characteristics, length of story and a brief glance at possible sex differences in syntactic complexity.

On examining the stories, I discovered another significant element. The children utilized several definable narrative structures in their stories. The relationship between character and action--the "plot-line"--took one or another of several distinct forms and I decided to see if the narrative structure chosen, consciously or unconsciously, by the child had an effect on the other variables of character, detail, syntax and length. Let me describe these observed "narrative structures."

Type A - This narrative pattern is relatively simple and consists of a single line best described as "situation + problem + solution." The first story quoted at the beginning of this article is an example of a Type A structure. Perhaps significantly, this pattern was used in the majority of written stories (61%) but much less (39%) in the oral stories.

Type B - This pattern is common to many stories read to children in the early years but was not a frequent structure in their writing. The structure consists of a repetition of the problem until a solution is found: (A) needs help or information and goes to (B) who doesn't help; (A) then goes to (C) who doesn't help and finally to (D) who does help and a solu-

tion is found. In the case of "The Little Red Hen," a well-known example of this structure, (A) ends up depending on (A). The equally well-known "Three Billy Goats Gruff" can be seen as only a slightly more sophisticated version where (A), the smallest goat, hands the problem on to (B) who hands it on to (C) who solves it. None of the written stories used this structure so prevalent in young children's literature, and only a few (9%) of the oral stories used it.

Type C - This story pattern depends on a reversal for its plot to be resolved. The twist in "Androcles and the Lion" is a familiar example. The sophistication of this reversal-technique was rare in the children's stories and, where it occurred, was usually immediately traceable to the "lion and mouse" stories heard by children at a previous time. When it did occur without reference to this immediate model, it occurred in the written rather than the oral versions.

Type D - This structure consists of a more or less complicated series of events that are connected in an indirect way rather than being directly caused by a previous event. The second story quoted at the beginning was placed in this category. Few examples of this structure were found in either mode, 13% in the oral stories, 9% in the written.

Type E - The fifth structure presents a more general narrative line with complex relationships between the events. The third story quoted is an example of what was identified as a "Type E" pattern.

Although the second and third stories quoted may seem to be only more detailed than the first (and, after all, the children were directed into having two main characters which suggested some kind of conflict between the two), I hope the reader will agree that they represent different types of narrative complexity.

The children's stories, both written and oral, were examined for syntactic maturity by using the T-unit (Minimal Terminable Unit) developed by Kellogg Hunt (1964). The T-unit, basically, is the shortest unit grammatically acceptable as a sentence.

> *Any complex or simple sentence would be one T-unit, but any compound or compound-complex sentence would consist of two or more T-units. (Hunt, 1970, p. 4)*

This type of categorization of syntax was necessary in order to avoid penalizing or rewarding either the student who happens to link a series of independent clauses together with "and" or the student who begins each punctuated sentence with "And" or "And then." A sample breakdown of numbered T-units from one of the collected stories looked like this:

1. Once there was an old man who had a monkey
2. and he was poor
3. and he goes to a well and drops a penny in every day
4. and when he drops a penny in he gets five cents back
5. and he buys food with it to feed his animals and to feed himself.
6. One day he dropped a penny in it
7. and he got twenty cents back.

The story continues but we may stop here. Obviously we would encounter problems in discovering what is happening with the actual language if we limited ourselves to what a particular child might punctuate as a sentence.

The results of the study, briefly stated, include the following:

1. The children's oral stories were, as a group, longer than their written stories.
2. Most of the stories, both oral and written, utilized a narrative structure I have called "Type A."

3. An easily recognized form in children's literature (Type B) was the least used by children as a model for composing.

4. More oral stories ranged over structures with more complex events than did the written stories. There was no obvious reason for such variety, but it's possible that the children were unused to oral story-telling and had no preconceived idea of how to compose orally. It may also suggest that the children are beginning to deal with more complex patterns of narrative and that this exploratory thinking came out more readily in an oral experience than the more formal "performance" of writing. The fact that 61% of the children's written stories fell into a Type A structure, compared to 39% in the oral, would indicate that in the written forms the children tended to rely on a more standardized story-format.

5. The use of major, secondary and minor characters was fairly everly distributed throughout the stories in both written and oral forms. Generally, the stories with more complex events and solutions used more minor characters.

6. The children's syntax seemed to fit the pattern of maturity suggested by the Hunt and O'Donnell studies of third and fourth graders with the mean number of words per T-unit essentially the same (8.46 in the oral stories, and 8.49 in the written). The difference in length of T-units between the two modes was not statistically significant.

7. Boys composed longer T-units than girls in the oral telling of stories, a result which verifies recent studies indicating that boys do not "lag" behind girls in language development.

Girls did *write* longer T-units than boys. This may indicate that girls are culturally more school/performance-oriented. If boys do not fall behind girls in actual language development, and yet girls seem to be, by one set of standards, better writers, we may find that we are valuing a rather limited behavior and performance in our expectations of boys and girls in a school setting.

My study also indicated a greater variability in syntactic complexity in the written form than in the oral form. This seems consistent with expectations since children at the third-grade level are only beginning to relate their oral language skills to the written language and so would range over a wider spectrum of development. Children have been acquiring and using oral language for a number of years before they enter school. It is possible that students are not receiving the kind of natural feedback that they received in oral language acquisition and thus are not as readily able to process what they "know" about language and transfer it to the new language of the printed page.

A side-issue I discovered while doing this research, and one of possible importance to teachers, was that oral story-telling caused more problems for many of the children than the written form. One student wrote a highly imaginative story and, finally, told a rather intricate oral story but he had a great deal of trouble in starting the oral form. He began by wanting to tell a story he had heard previously and I, thinking the microphone of the tape-recorder was making him nervous and that the telling of a familiar story would help him relax, agreed to that. Immediately, he became bogged down in particulars.

Student: *And then Red Fox came up to Long Claw and said . . . (long pause) . . . I don't know what he said . . . (pause.*

Interviewer: *You don't want to make up something that he said.*

Student: *He said . . . (long pause) . . . Oh, what does he say? Oh! . . . (pause) . . . And then Long Claw said . . . (pause) . . . oh, I can't remember it. I don't want to tell a story.*

At this point I suggested that trying to tell someone else's story might be a problem because you had to remember certain parts and that it might be easier to make up your own story as you go along. The idea of "someone else's story" persisted, however, as can be seen in this exchange with another student.

Interviewer: *You've told stories before.*

Student: *No . . .*

Interviewer: *Haven't you told ghost stories?*

Student: *Yeah, but I don't make them up. Other people do.*

One of the problems these students seemed to be dealing with was the idea that anyone can *write* stories but oral stories are someone else's--jokes, anecdotes, etc. These forms are all in our oral tradition of story-telling. But I've heard children make up ghost stories that were not based on someone else's story so it's possible that the main problem is in the child's definition of "story-telling." It is also possible that the stories children make up are based on a very familiar form such as ghost stories and that they substitute characters and events within a known pattern. Story-telling may also not seem like a "school" activity to some since one child remarked, "Oh, you mean stories like we tell at recess?"

A second problem in oral story-telling had to do with preconceived ideas of correctness. In one session a student seemed to be uncomfortable and I made a suggestion.

Interviewer: *Why don't you think about it for a while. There isn't any <u>right</u> way of telling this story.*

Student: *It's just telling a story?*

Interviewer: *It's just telling a story.*

In another interview, a student asked:

Student: *What if I make a mistake?*

Interviewer: *What mistakes are there to make?*

Student: *If I give you some, you'll correct me.*

Interviewer: *I'm not going to do anything like corrections. What I'm interested in is the stories. I like to hear stories and I like to read stories and that's why I'm going to do this, to see what it is that I like about them. So I won't be correcting them in any way.*

Student: *Don't laugh.*

The above examples seem to indicate a fear of correction or of performing in front of an audience where the audience may hear a "mistake" or possibly even laugh. If I had worked with these students longer and they had known me better this concern might have lessened, but I do think there's an element of pressure in the possibility of an immediate reac-

tion to a "mistake" rather than the delayed reaction on written papers. It might be less embarrassing to be corrected without the directly personal interaction, although I feel that "correction" in either written or oral forms of this kind of creative work would be detrimental.

A final problem noticed in oral story-telling was some children's inability to remember where they were after they had paused to further compose the story. This happened with all the narrative structures chosen. With the written form, the child was able to look back to "see where she/he was." Perhaps it is developmentally difficult for children of this age (8 and 9 year olds) to hold an item in their head while they carry on the composition. So that this problem wouldn't interfere with the telling of the story, I reflected the last line the child had given me when she/he was ready to resume.

There are often certain elements that make a story unique, one that we remember above all the other stories we've heard or read during a particular time. And often, perhaps, this uniqueness has little to do with an "assignment," either given or self-chosen. Two of the stories I solicited from the twenty-three students stand out in my mind and yet, interestingly enough, they rated as two of the lowest in syntactic complexity. I've re-punctuated the first in more conventional arrangement than the original for the ease of the reader.

One day Spy Mouse got a call from his chief, and he said, "I want you to investigate Mitchell Manor right away."

"Yes, sir, I'm going now."

Knock, knock.

"Hi, may I come in?"

"Yes, go right in."

"May I look around?"

"Well, okay."

"Well, thanks for letting me."

"You're welcome."

Ding-a-ling.

"Hello."

"Hi, chief. I found something."

"What is it?"

"It's some blood from the killing."

"OK, come over to the police station and we'll check it out."

"OK."

Once upon a time there was a lion and a rabbit. They were very good friends. They lived together. And they hunted for their food together. But once they had a fight and they both split up. And now the lion is after the rabbit. But the rabbit had a big aunt that was 1,000 feet high. So the lion left the rabbit alone. One day the lion met a lady lion and they got married. And then the rabbit stayed with his Aunt Clumz. And they lived happily ever after.

What makes these stories interesting and unique to me are the sense of detail (even exaggerated as in the height of the "aunt") and dialogue, dramatically portrayed, that one often hears when children are telling stories to each other about their lives or some experienced situation as well as "playing" with language in self-talk situations. Both stories, it seems to me, come from a natural language context. The fact that both stories are "low" in syntactic complexity--and particularly in the dialogue-story where simple syntax is a necessity--shows me that we cannot judge a total language product by just one standard.

Research can, perhaps, only tell us what a child or group of children is doing but, since we want to use what has been discovered about child language-development, research findings can aim us in certain directions. The research being done in syntax usually tells us only about syntax. It can tell us what we cannot expect of a child at a particular stage of development, but it cannot tell us how to develop quality writers. The "natural language context" stressed by Moffett (1968) seems to me to be an important caution to remember whenever we begin to interpret any research findings about syntax with an eye toward applying it in the classroom. Although Hunt and others, for example, suggest that sentence-combining activities may help develop better writing, if this is not done on an individual basis in the child's own language context the child is only learning to perform an exercise in syntax that will not carry over to her/his writing. Greater syntactic maturity may only be a part of what helps children write "better." Their own experiences, how writing is modeled for them, how much they are encouraged to write, what reactions they get to their writing, their sense of structure in various modes, the context from which they write and their own stage of cognitive development will all influence their writing.

With the above mentioned balances to a syntactical approach kept in mind, what might this study suggest for further improvement of children's writing? Although children may not usually compose oral stories as part of their classroom activities, they exhibit as much language maturity in their oral stories as in their written stories. The same in true for narrative complexity and diversity. One of the possible implications of this study is that, if children "try out" different structures orally before they attempt to perform them in the written mode, they should be allowed increased time for oral story-telling in order to develop a greater variety of language techniques. Perhaps the oral form provides a natural context in Moffett's terms for language development. Oral story-telling, tape-recorders in the classroom for individual story-telling and group stories would add to this more natural way of developing language by using it and hearing others use it. This could provide a good background for the actual act of writing.

It could also provide a natural way of feedback for the child. Hearing other children compose along with him, listening to his own oral stories and hearing the oral stories of older students would give needed feedback for development in both syntax and style.

Suggestions for revising stories must also come from other children. If ideas of what constitute "good" writing come only from the teacher and particularly only in the form of correcting grammar, the child interprets all such comments as correcting "mistakes" and it will not improve his writing. As writing is more than mechanical accuracy, the feedback a child needs will be more mechanical correction. It must also be more than well-meant praise or veiled condemnation. The child needs a real, legitimate and specific reaction to what the child has communicated to teacher and peers. Writing comes alive and a real sense of communication develops when this begins to happen. Writing becomes something more than just a practice in better sentence-making.

What we need to be aware of is that we cannot expect the child to write above her/his level of language development. What we want to do is aid that development. What we can do is provide a natural setting for feedback and revision--the child's own sense of what was intended and what the audience perceived. My study does not attempt to *prove* that story-telling, in both oral and written forms, is that kind of natural activity with natural feedback occurring within the child's level of language development, but I ended my research on these stories not only with a renewed interest in children's story-telling and with a feeling that such forms showed the student's strengths in language, but with a belief that story-making was a vitally important part of language development.